

Introduction

Orange County is within the Research Triangle region of North Carolina—one of the most rapidly developing areas in the nation. A national study completed in 2002 found that the Triangle region (comprised of seven counties) ranked as the third most sprawling metropolitan area in the nation. Sprawling development—that is, the rapid conversion of rural open space to urban and suburban land uses—is reducing open space in North Carolina at the rate of 277 acres per day (NCDENR, 2004). Essential wildlife habitat is lost and the connectivity of wildlife corridors is broken when development is allowed to proceed without adequate open space planning.

Initial Orange County Inventory (1988)

In 1987 the Triangle Land Conservancy recognized the need for an inventory of the remaining natural areas within Orange County in order to protect the important sites that contain rare species, unique habitats, wildlife, and scenic areas. The Orange County Board of Commissioners and the Town boards of Carrboro and Chapel Hill responded to the recommendations by the Triangle Land Conservancy and others by providing funds to initiate the survey.

The initial *Inventory of Natural Areas and Wildlife Habitat of Orange County, North Carolina* was completed by Dawson Sather and Stephen Hall in 1988. The report identified 64 sites that were described to be the most significant of the many locations visited during the course of this survey. Collectively, the sites portray much of the natural diversity of the county, from dry upland ridges to river bluffs and bottomland forests. There are several national, state and regionally significant areas, sites for rare plants and animals, along with habitats and corridors for plants and wildlife.

Update to the Orange County Inventory (2004)

In 2000, Orange County established a new department charged with working, through various means, to protect the county's most important natural and cultural resource lands. The Environment and Resource Conservation Department (ERCD) works with landowners and conservation partners to protect those sites through its Lands Legacy Program. One source of data used by ERCD to identify priority sites is the 1988 county inventory of natural areas. Because that inventory was over 12 years old, ERCD sought matching funds for an update from the North Carolina Natural Heritage Trust Fund, by way of the NC Natural Heritage Program. Funds were awarded and biologist Bruce Sorrie was hired to conduct the update, which he did from 2001 to 2003. Sorrie visited a total of 22 priority sites, including four new sites. The results of his findings are incorporated into the original (1988) report, along with updated maps by ERCD and data from the NC Natural Heritage Program.

Collectively, the authors have documented several extirpations of species that once lived in this area, but have been wiped out by the various habitat modifications associated with urban growth and development and reservoir construction. For the remaining natural areas, the information and recommendations presented here can be used by various jurisdictions and